THE CHRONOS KEY

by Dennis Longtin

We all travel through time, but only one way. I found the key to go any direction I pleased. I should have left it in the lock.

THE CHRONOS KEY

Copyright © 2025 by Dennis Longtin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: September 2025

Index of Chapters

Prologue: The Broken Clock

Chapter 1: The Workshop Dream
Chapter 2: A Gathering of Skeptics
Chapter 3: A Machine Made of Brass and Belief
Chapter 4: The First Leap
Chapter 5: A World in Bloom
Chapter 6: The Hollow People
Chapter 7: The Terrors Below
Chapter 8: The Theft of Time
Chapter 9: A Desperate Flight
Chapter 10: The End of All Things

Chapter 11: The Long Journey Home
Chapter 12: A Story No One Believes

Epilogue: The Only Proof

Prologue: The Broken Clock

Most people mark their lives by the steady, reliable tick of a clock. Seconds into minutes, minutes into hours. A predictable, gentle slope from cradle to grave.

My life is measured by the space between ticks.

You have to understand, I was a man obsessed with time long before I ever thought of conquering it. It started in my grandfather's old workshop, a dusty sanctuary smelling of oil and ozone. He was a watchmaker, and he taught me that

inside every clock is a heart—a pendulum or a spring—that beats in perfect, mechanical rhythm. To fix a clock, he'd say, you just have to listen to its heart and find where the rhythm broke.

I suppose that's what I've been trying to do all my life. I looked at the world, at all its pain and fleeting beauty, and I heard a broken rhythm. I became convinced that time itself was the ultimate machine, and if I could just understand its gears and levers, I could fix more than just clocks. I could… well, I could do the impossible.

My name is Elias Thorne. I am an inventor, or a madman, depending on which of my very few remaining friends you ask. They sat in my parlor that first night, humoring me, their faces masks of polite doubt. I told them I had not only discovered the fourth dimension but built a carriage to ride through it. I told them I had constructed a Key to all of time.

They laughed, of course. A gentle, patronizing sound. They thought it was a clever metaphor for some new philosophical idea.

They were wrong.

It was all real. The polished brass and quartz, the mathematics scribbled on every available surface of my workshop, the terrifying, beautiful truth of it. I had done it.

This is not the story of that dinner party. This is the story of what happened after. This is the account of my journey, my witness to the unthinkable ends of the world we know. I brought back no souvenirs, no exotic flowers or strange artifacts. I brought back only this story, and the certain, chilling knowledge of where our path leads.

I write this down now not for fame, or to prove my sanity to those who whispered behind my back. I write it as a warning, etched against the dying of the light. A final, desperate plea from a man who has seen the clock's final, terrible tick.

Listen, then. And believe, if you can, what I alone know to be true.

Chapter 1: The Workshop Dream

The smell of oil is the smell of my sanity. Or my madness. Most days, I can't tell the difference.

My world was a ten-foot circle of light from a green-shaded lamp, buried in the chaos of my workshop. It was a place of beautiful clutter. Brass gears gleamed like pirate gold on the workbench. Skeins of copper wire spilled from drawers. Diagrams covered the walls, layered over each other until the plaster itself seemed to be made of calculations.

And in the center of it all, sat the Key.

That's what I called it, anyway. To anyone else, it would have looked like a mess. A sled-like frame of brass and polished ironwood, bristling with levers, dials, and crystalline rods that hummed with a low, internal energy if you listened closely enough. It was not sleek. It was not elegant. It was a thing of pure function, a fist of machinery designed to punch a hole through the fabric of the world.

I wiped my greasy hands on a rag that was already more oil than cloth. My back ached from hunching over. My eyes burned from squinting at tiny, impossibly precise calibrations. But a fierce joy burned in my chest, brighter than any lamp.

It had started as a thought, a "what if" whispered in the back of my mind during one of my grandfather's long lessons on escapements and mainsprings. What if time was just another gear? What if you could… disengage it? What if you could put the universe in neutral and coast?

The theories came first. The math. Endless, beautiful, terrifying math that filled notebooks and threatened to swallow my mind whole. I barely ate. I rarely slept. My old life—teaching physics at the university, attending dreary faculty dinners—faded away like a forgotten dream. This was the only reality that mattered.

The construction was the hard part. Finding materials that could withstand forces no material was ever meant to withstand. Sourcing quartz of impossible purity to focus the energies. Spending my last dime on a specific alloy of brass that a doddering old metalsmith swore was used in ancient astrolabes.

My friends thought I'd lost it. My neighbor, Dr. Alan Ward, a good man with a kind heart and a limited imagination, would stop by under the guise of checking on me. He'd see me talking to a complicated knot of wires and shake his head.

"Elias," he'd say, his voice full of that gentle concern I'd come to dread. "You need to get out of this room. Breathe fresh air. This… project… it's not good for you."

He meant well. They all meant well. But they were like ants trying to understand the stars. They lived their lives on the flat, two-dimensional surface of the present, utterly unaware of the dizzying heights of the future and the deep, buried foundations of the past that surrounded them.

I was building a ladder.

Tonight was different. Tonight, the final connection was made. The last crystal was seated in its housing with a soft, definitive *click* that seemed to echo in the silent workshop. A low thrum of power vibrated through the floorboards, up through the soles of my shoes, and into my bones. The hairs on my arms stood up.

It was ready.

A cold knot of fear tightened in my stomach, right beside the burning knot of excitement. This was it. The line between theory and practice. What if the math was wrong? What if the forces involved simply tore the machine—and me—into subatomic confetti?

I looked at the odd, ungainly vehicle. It wasn't much to look at. But it was the most important thing ever built by human hands. I knew it. I felt it in my soul.

I reached out a trembling hand and rested my fingers on the main control lever. It was cool and smooth beneath my touch.

I didn’t pull it. Not yet.

A man should sleep on the edge of such a cliff. I told myself it was prudence. To check the calculations one more time at dawn, with a fresh mind. But the truth was, I was terrified. The immensity of what I was about to do finally crashed down on me.

I switched off the lamp, plunging the workshop into darkness. But the image of the machine was burned onto my eyes. I could still see its outline, could still feel its potential humming

in the silence.

Tomorrow, I decided. Tomorrow, I would not just dream about time. I would reach out and touch it.

Chapter 2: A Gathering of Skeptics

Sleep never came. I lay in my narrow bed, staring at the ceiling as the faint pre-dawn light crept around the edges of the curtains. The house was silent, but my mind was roaring. Equations spun behind my eyes. Theories folded in on themselves. Every possible thing that could go wrong played out in vivid, terrifying detail.

By the time the sun properly rose, I was a wreck of nerves and excitement. I needed to do something, to talk to someone, or I'd vibrate right out of my own skin. But I couldn't just show them. Not yet. They'd have me committed. I needed to test the waters. To plant the seed.

And so, I did the most foolish thing imaginable. I decided to throw a dinner party.

It wasn't a grand affair. Just a few of the people whose opinions, for some reason, I still half-valued. Alan Ward was the first to arrive, his kind face etched with surprise that my front door was actually answered.

"Elias! You're… upright," he said, stepping inside and handing me his coat. "I was beginning to think you'd welded yourself to that contraption of yours."

"It's finished, Alan," I said, the words bursting out of me before I could stop them.

He gave me a patient, doctorly look. "The clock? You finally fixed that grandfather clock in the hall?"

"No. Not a clock. The *Key* ."

His smile became fixed. "Right. The Key. Of course."

The others arrived soon after: Clara, a sharp-witted journalist who wrote about scientific breakthroughs she mostly didn't believe in; and Robert, a former colleague from the university,

a philosopher who loved debate more than truth.

Dinner was a quiet, awkward affair. I pushed my food around my plate. I couldn't eat. The anticipation was a physical pressure in my chest. Finally, over a passable sherry, Robert leaned back in his chair.

"So, Elias. Alan says you've been building a world-changing device in your workshop. Care to enlighten us? Is it a new kind of mousetrap?"

This was my chance. I took a breath, trying to steady my voice. "You all understand that geometry is the study of dimensions. A line has one, a square has two, a cube has three."

Clara nodded, swirling her glass. "Primary school lessons, Elias. Get to the point."

"What if there was a fourth dimension?" I said, leaning forward. "Not a spatial one, but a temporal one. A dimension of time. We're constantly moving through it, but only in one direction, at one fixed speed, like… like riders on a runaway train with no controls."

Alan frowned. “But time isn’t a *place* , Elias. It’s a… a measurement. A concept.”

“That’s what we’ve always assumed,” I said, my passion overriding my caution. “But what if it’s a real, tangible dimension, like length or width? And what if you could, with the right application of force, tilt yourself out of the current of time? To move through it as easily as you might walk across this room?”

Robert chuckled, a dry, dusty sound. “A charming metaphor, Elias. For what? The folly of man trying to escape his mortality? You should write a paper for the philosophy journal.”

“It’s not a metaphor!” I said, my voice rising. “I’ve done it. In theory. And I’ve built a machine to prove it. A vehicle to ride through the centuries.”

The silence that followed was heavy and absolute. Clara looked at me with a journalist’s skeptical eye, searching for a joke. Robert’s smile was one of pure, academic pity. Alan’s face was full of genuine worry.

“Ride through the centuries,” Robert repeated slowly,

savoring the absurdity. “And what does this… time-brougham… look like?”

“It’s brass and ironwood. With quartz focusing rods,” I said, hearing how childish it sounded in the plush, normal room.

“And where do you park it?” Clara asked, a smirk playing on her lips. “In the past or the future?”

They laughed then. It wasn’t cruel laughter, but it was worse. It was the light, easy laughter of people dismissing a fantasy. To them, I was a brilliant man who had finally cracked under the strain of his own intellect. I was a curiosity. A tragedy.

My face grew hot. The glorious certainty I’d felt in my workshop curdled into something ugly and defensive. They couldn’t see it. They were blind.

“You think it’s impossible,” I stated, my voice flat.

“My dear fellow,” Robert said, wiping his eye. “It’s not that we think it’s impossible. It’s that we know it is. It’s a logical absurdity. A pleasant fiction.”

“I’ll show you,” I snapped, standing up so suddenly my chair

scraped back. “Right now. Come to the workshop. I’ll show you all.”

Alan stood up, holding his hands out in a calming gesture. “Elias, no one needs a demonstration. We’re your friends. We’re just… concerned. Perhaps you should rest.”

That was the final straw. Concern. Patronizing, dismissive *concern* .

“No,” I said, my voice cold. “You don’t believe me. That’s fine. I don’t need you to believe the theory. I just need you to witness the fact.”

I turned and walked out of the dining room, not checking to see if they followed. I heard their chairs scrape, their murmured, worried conversations. But they followed. Out of curiosity, out of pity, out of a sense of duty—they followed me down the hall to the door of my workshop.

I threw the door open and stood aside, letting them see the Key sitting in the center of the room, gleaming under the single electric bulb.

They stared at it. At the mess of wires, the bizarre levers, the

hunks of crystal.

There was another long silence.

Robert was the first to speak, his voice quiet with something like disappointment. “Elias… that’s it? That’s your time machine?”

It was just a machine to them. A weird, complex, pointless machine.

And in that moment, I knew I had to use it. Not for science. Not for discovery.

I had to use it to prove them wrong.

Chapter 3: A Machine Made of Brass and Belief

They stood clustered in the doorway of my workshop, a wall of doubt in fine clothing. Alan, Robert, and Clara. They didn’t step inside, as if the very air in the room was tainted by my delusion. They just stared at the Key, and their silence was a

heavier judgment than any laughter could have been.

Robert finally broke it, his voice dripping with the kind of condescension only a philosopher can muster. “It’s… certainly intricate, Elias. A fascinating piece of… sculpture.”

“It’s not a sculpture,” I said, the words tight in my throat. I walked over to the machine, my hand finding the cool, familiar brass of the main rail. “Every piece has a purpose. This lever controls the directional vector through the temporal field. These dials here,” I pointed to a series of glass-faced gauges filled with complex markings, “measure the chronological displacement. And these crystals…” I gestured to the humming quartz rods, “…they focus the energy. They’re the heart of it.”

Clara stepped forward, just one foot over the threshold, her journalist’s eyes scanning the machine with a clinical detachment. “What energy, Elias? There’s no engine. No boiler. No power source that I can see.”

“It’s not that kind of power,” I tried to explain, feeling the gulf between my understanding and theirs widen into an uncrossable chasm. “It taps into the potential energy of time itself. The tension between the past and the future. It’s… it’s

everywhere. You just need to know how to harness it."

Alan finally spoke, his voice gentle, the way you'd speak to a scared animal or a confused child. "Elias, this is what I was afraid of. You've been working in isolation for too long. You're not thinking clearly. This… thing… it can't work. The laws of physics–"

"The laws of physics are a description of *how* things work, not a prison sentence for what's *possible* !" I interrupted, my frustration boiling over. "Don't you see? This is the next step! This is what lies beyond those laws!"

I was losing them with every word. Their faces were closed off, polite masks over a core of profound embarrassment for me. I was a spectacle. A sad one.

I had to show them. There was no other way.

"I'll give you a demonstration," I said, my voice dropping to a low, intense whisper. "A small one. Just a few minutes. You can watch. You can see it happen."

Before any of them could protest, I moved. I climbed onto the machine, settling into the hard, wooden seat. My heart was

hammering against my ribs like it wanted to escape. This was it. No more theory. No more talk.

“Elias, get down from there this instant,” Alan said, his doctor’s voice taking on a note of command. “This is not a game.”

“It’s not,” I agreed. My fingers found the main control lever. I took a deep breath, the air tasting of oil and ozone and my own fear.

“Don’t do this,” Clara said, and for the first time, I heard real alarm in her voice. Not belief, but the fear that a madman was about to electrocute himself in front of her.

I ignored them. All of them. I focused on the dials. I pictured the temporal coordinates in my mind—a mere three minutes into the future. A short, safe jump. Just enough to vanish before their eyes and reappear a moment later. Proof.

I threw the lever.

The world dissolved.

It wasn’t a sound. It was a feeling. A sensation of

unimaginable velocity without any movement. The workshop didn't vanish; it *blurred* . The colors ran together like wet paint. Alan, Robert, and Clara became smears of grey and brown and blue, their horrified expressions stretching into long, meaningless streaks of light. The hum of the crystals rose to a deafening, teeth-rattling whine that wasn't a sound you heard with your ears, but felt in your very bones.

I saw the lamp on my workbench flicker and die, then flare back to life, then die again, a thousand times in a single second. Dust motes danced in the air, tracing impossible, hyper-fast patterns. I felt a profound nausea, a sense of falling in every direction at once.

It lasted forever. It lasted less than a heartbeat.

And then it stopped.

The whine ceased. The world snapped back into focus with a jarring, final *thud* . The colors were right. The shapes were solid. I was still in my workshop, sitting on the Key.

I had done it. I had traveled through time.

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding, a shaky,

triumphant laugh bubbling up in my chest. I looked toward the doorway, ready to see their stunned, believing faces.

The doorway was empty.

I blinked. The house was utterly silent. Not just quiet, but a deep, hollow silence. The kind of silence that feels heavy and wrong.

I climbed off the machine, my legs wobbly. “Alan?” I called out. My voice sounded too loud in the stillness. “Robert? Clara? You can come out now. The joke’s over.”

No answer.

I walked out of the workshop and into the hall. The dining room was empty. The half-finished glasses of sherry sat on the table. Their chairs were pushed back, just as they had been when they’d followed me.

But they were gone.

A cold trickle of dread started down my spine. It had worked. I had moved forward. But how far? Three minutes? Or had something gone wrong?

I rushed to the front window and pulled back the curtain. The street outside was familiar, but… off. The gas lamps were lit, but they burned with a strange, too-bright intensity. A motor-car puttered past, but its design was subtly wrong, sleeker and quieter than any I'd ever seen.

I had done more than jump three minutes. I had leapt forward. Years, by the look of it.

A wave of dizzying vertigo washed over me. I had proven my theory. I had silenced my critics.

I was alone, and farther from home than any human being had ever been.

Chapter 4: The First Leap

The silence in the house was a physical thing. It pressed in on my ears, a thick, woolly absence of sound that was more disturbing than any noise. My own breathing sounded ragged and alien. I was still standing by the window, my fingers clutching the curtain, staring at the wrongness of the street outside.

Three minutes. That's all it was supposed to be. A parlor trick. A proof of concept.

This was no parlor trick.

The motor-car that had puttered past was gone, but the memory of its odd, silent engine chilled me. The gas lamps flickered with a steady, electric-like whiteness, not the warm, wavering glow I knew. The world outside my window was my world, but seen through a lens that warped it just slightly. It was a familiar face with a stranger's eyes.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to prickle at the edges of my mind. What had I done? The math. I must have miscalculated. A decimal point in the wrong place. An variable misapplied. My brilliant equations had thrown me further than I ever meant to go.

I had to get back.

I stumbled away from the window, my legs feeling like rubber, and half-ran, half-fell back into my workshop. The Key sat there, humming softly, innocently, as if it hadn't just ripped me out of my own century. It was my only way home.

I scrambled onto the hard seat, my hands shaking so badly I could barely grip the controls. Reverse the polarity. Invert the coordinates. The theory was simple. The practice was terrifying. What if I overshot? What if I flung myself back into the Jurassic period to be devoured by some prehistoric horror? The possibilities were endless, and nearly all of them were bad.

I took a few deep, gulping breaths, trying to steady my nerves. I had to be precise. I had to focus. I closed my eyes, picturing the workshop as it was just moments ago. The smell of Alan's pipe tobacco. The skeptical tilt of Robert's head. The worried crease in Clara's brow. I focused on that moment, that specific point in time, and I wrenched the main lever back.

The blurring sensation was even more violent this time. The world didn't just run like paint; it screamed. The light was a solid, painful white bar across my vision. The whine of the crystals was a shriek that felt like it was flaying the skin from my bones. I was being pulled apart, stretched thin across an infinite expanse of nothing.

And then, with the same sudden, gut-lurching *thud* , it stopped.

The workshop was dark. The single electric bulb was off. The only light came from the dying embers in the fireplace from the next room.

And there were voices.

“—absolutely vanished! I saw it! One second he was there, the next… poof!” It was Robert, his voice high with a mixture of fear and excitement.

“He’s hiding. It’s a trick. A wire, a mirror, something.” That was Clara, trying to force logic onto the illogical.

“Elias!” Alan shouted, his voice echoing in the near-darkness. “Elias, this isn’t funny! Where are you?”

They were here. They were all here. I was back.

A wave of relief so powerful it made me lightheaded washed over me. I’d done it. I’d returned. I took a moment to compose myself, to slow my racing heart. I couldn’t let them see my terror. I had to be the calm inventor, the master of his creation.

I stood up from the machine, my movements deliberately

slow. I stepped out of the deep shadows of the workshop and into the dim light of the hallway.

They were huddled together by the dining room door, their faces pale and shocked. Alan had a fire poker held in front of him like a sword.

“Looking for me?” I said, and I was proud of how steady my voice sounded.

All three of them jumped. Clara let out a short, sharp scream. Robert stumbled back a step, his eyes wide as dinner plates. Alan just stared, his mouth hanging open, the fire poker lowering slowly.

“But… but how?” Alan stammered. “You were there… and then you weren’t. For a full minute!”

A minute. I had been gone a minute. The dislocation between the eternity I experienced and the single minute that passed here was enough to make my head spin.

“I told you,” I said, a hard edge of triumph in my voice now. The fear was receding, replaced by the glorious, vindicating truth. “I told you all. It’s no trick. It’s no metaphor. I have

been to the future and back."

I walked toward them. They shrank back, not in fear of me, but in awe of what I represented. The impossible was standing right in front of them, smelling of machine oil and sweat.

Robert found his voice first. "The future? What… what was it like?"

I looked at their faces, pale and eager and terrified. I saw the doubt finally, completely, shattered. I had what I wanted. Their belief. Their awe.

But the memory of that silent, wrong street surfaced in my mind. The chilling sight of a world that had moved on without me.

I shook my head, a sudden gravity settling over me. "It was only a glimpse. A few years, perhaps. The world was… quieter."

I didn't tell them about the cold dread. I didn't tell them how alone I felt. That was my burden. The price of the proof.

The proof was enough. For now.

They believed.

And for the first time, staring into their shocked and believing faces, I understood the true weight of what I had done. I had not just built a machine.

I had unlocked a door that should have stayed closed.

Chapter 5: A World in Bloom

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of frantic questions and stunned silence. My guests' skepticism had been vaporized, replaced by a buzzing, almost fearful curiosity. They peppered me with questions I couldn't fully answer. How did it feel? Could you see time passing? What year was it?

I gave them vague, unsatisfactory answers. The truth was too immense, too personal. The experience was less about seeing and more about *being* —a violent, nauseating state of pure transition. And the year? I had no idea. The machine's dials were calibrated to my own temporal calculations, not the Gregorian calendar. I'd gone forward, and I'd come back. That was all I knew for certain.

Eventually, they left, each of them casting long, backward glances at the workshop door as if it were the entrance to a tomb—or a cathedral. Alan was the last to go, his hand on my shoulder.

"Elias," he'd said, his voice low and serious. "What you've done… it's beyond anything. Be careful. Please."

I assured him I would be. But the moment the door closed behind him, the assurance felt like a lie. Careful? How does one be careful with infinity? The brief, terrifying leap had been a taste, and it had ignited a hunger in me that nothing in my present could satisfy. A minute into the future had shown me a strangely quiet street. What would a century show me? A millennium?

The Key sat in my workshop, humming its low, enticing hum.

It was no longer just a machine; it was a question. And I had to know the answer.

I spent the next day in a feverish state, making adjustments. The return trip had been rougher than the outgoing one. The temporal stabilizers needed reinforcing. I added a more comfortable seat, anchored storage compartments for supplies —water, some dried food, a journal and pencils. I was no longer planning a demonstration. I was planning an expedition.

Two days after my first, frantic leap, I was ready. The morning sun streamed into the workshop, making the brass of the Key gleam. This time, there was no audience. This was for me.

I took a final look around my cluttered, familiar workshop— the home of my old life. Then, with a resolve that felt both thrilling and fatal, I climbed aboard. I set the coordinates for a far more ambitious jump. Not minutes, not years. Centuries.

I threw the lever.

The scream of reality tearing apart was even louder this time. The blur was a nauseating vortex of color and light. I clung to

the machine, my knuckles white, my stomach lurching. Time wasn't a river to be sailed; it was a storm to be endured. I saw the sun outside the window streak across the sky, over and over, its light flaring and dying in a frantic, silent pulse. The walls of my house seemed to melt and reform, the plaster aging and renewing itself in seconds.

It was agony. It was ecstasy.

And then, silence.

The machine settled with its now-familiar final *thud* . The terrible noise and motion ceased. I was left gasping, my body trembling with the aftershocks of the journey.

I was still in my workshop.

But the workshop was ruins.

The room was a skeleton of itself. The walls were crumbling, stained with water and moss. The roof was mostly gone, open to a sky of a soft, pearlescent blue. A gentle, warm breeze rustled through thick, green vines that had invaded, covering the rusted remains of my tools and workbenches. The air smelled incredibly clean, rich with the scent of blooming

flowers and damp earth.

I climbed off the machine, my boots crunching on broken plaster and rotten wood. I picked my way through the devastation of my former life, toward where the front of my house should have been.

It was gone.

There was no house. No street. No city.

I stood at the edge of a wide, shallow valley, blanketed in lush, vibrant grass and dotted with strangely shaped, silver-barked trees. The air was warm and humid. In the distance, a wide, slow-moving river glittered in the sunlight. The sky was a deeper blue than I'd ever seen, and the sun felt warmer on my skin.

London was gone. England was gone. All of it, vanished as if it had never been. The silence was absolute, broken only by the whisper of the wind and the distant call of some unknown bird.

A profound, awe-filled peace settled over me. This wasn't the cold, wrong future of my first jump. This was… paradise.

Nature had reclaimed everything. The grime, the noise, the endless struggle of mankind—all of it was washed clean. The world was healed.

I had done it. I had traveled to the far future, and it was more beautiful than I could have ever dreamed.

I took a deep, joyous breath of the clean, sweet air, a laugh of pure wonder escaping my lips. I was the first and only man to witness this. The lone explorer of a new, pristine world.

The laugh died in my throat.

Something moved in the long grass about a hundred yards away.

I froze, squinting against the bright sun. The grass swayed again. It wasn't the wind. It was a deliberate, smooth motion.

Then, a figure stood up.

It was a human. Or at least, it was humanoid. Slender, dressed in simple, flowing robes of a soft purple material. Their skin was a smooth, nut-brown, and their hair was long and pale gold. They were staring directly at me, their expression one of

neither fear nor aggression, but of a calm, deep curiosity.

I was not alone.

The Age of Man was over. But its children remained.

Chapter 6: The Hollow People

We stood there for a long moment, separated by a field of tall grass, two creatures from different ends of time regarding each other. My heart, which had been soaring with the beauty of this new world, was now pounding with a different kind of intensity. Fear, yes, but also an overwhelming, desperate curiosity.

The figure raised a hand, not in a threat, but in a slow, graceful gesture of greeting. The movement was so fluid it seemed unnatural. I found myself raising my own hand in a clumsy, hesitant wave.

They began to walk toward me. Their gait was effortless, almost gliding over the uneven ground. As they drew closer, I could see their features more clearly. They were beautiful, in a way that was almost too perfect. Symmetrical, unblemished, with large, light-colored eyes that held a placid, gentle emptiness. They looked young, but there was an ancient stillness in their gaze that was deeply unsettling.

“Hello?” I called out, my voice sounding rough and alien in the perfect quiet. “Can you understand me?”

They stopped a few feet from me, their head tilting. A small, benign smile touched their lips. They spoke, and their voice was like music, a soft, melodic flow of syllables that meant absolutely nothing to me. It was no language I had ever heard.

I shook my head, pointing to my ear. “I don’t understand.”

They seemed to grasp this. They nodded slowly, then gestured for me to follow them. There was no urgency, no command. It was a simple, open invitation.

What choice did I have? I was a castaway here. I followed.

We walked for perhaps half an hour, across the blooming

meadow and into a grove of those strange silver-barked trees. The air was filled with the scent of unknown flowers. I saw more of the people. They moved in small groups or sat alone beneath the trees, always with that same serene, unhurried calm. They wore similar simple robes in soft colors. They spoke little, and when they did, it was in those same quiet, musical tones. They looked at me with curiosity, but it was a shallow thing. There was no shock, no alarm. It was as if a new type of butterfly had fluttered into their garden.

They led me to their home. It wasn't a city. It wasn't even a village. It was a collection of wide, low buildings that seemed to grow organically out of the landscape, made of a polished, pearlescent material that gleamed in the sun. There were no sharp angles, no streets, no signs of industry or commerce. Everything was open to the air, peaceful and clean.

This was humanity’s future. This was our triumph. A world without struggle. Without pain.

And I felt a cold dread begin to creep up my spine.

It was too perfect. Too quiet. I saw no children. I saw no one old. Everyone was like my guide—youthful, beautiful, and utterly placid. They offered me fruit from a tree, a succulent,

pink thing that tasted like honey and sunshine. They gave me water from a clear stream that ran through their settlement. They were generous, kind, and utterly vacant.

I tried to communicate, using gestures, pointing to myself, saying “Elias,” pointing to the sky to indicate I came from elsewhere. They just smiled those gentle, empty smiles and nodded. They understood I was different, but they seemed to have no framework for what that might mean. There was no concept of a stranger, of danger, of history.

I was taken to a larger, circular building, a communal space where a group of them were gathered. They were not working. They were not discussing. They were simply… being. Some lounged on soft-looking couches, others gently touched large, crystalline structures that pulsed with a soft, internal light, their faces blank with a mild contentment.

This was not a civilization. It was a museum exhibit of one. It was the echo of a species that had solved all its problems and, in doing so, had solved itself out of existence. They had no curiosity beyond the immediate, no drive, no passion. They were well-fed, comfortable, and hollow.

My guide—I thought of him as Aven for his golden hair—

motioned for me to sit. He brought me more fruit. I took it, my mind reeling. What had happened here? Where was the fire, the ambition, the glorious, messy, painful struggle of humanity? It had been smoothed away, leaving only this peaceful, beautiful shell.

As dusk began to fall, painting the sky in incredible shades of violet and orange, the true nature of this world began to reveal itself. A low, deep gong sounded, not from any device I could see, but seemingly from the earth itself.

The people, who had been scattered and calm, began to move with a new purpose. Their serene expressions flickered with something I hadn't seen before: a faint, uniform anxiety. They stopped their gentle activities and began to move toward the larger buildings. They moved quickly, without a word.

Aven took my arm. His touch was still gentle, but there was an insistence to it now. His benign smile was gone, replaced by a look of placid urgency. He pulled me toward one of the open buildings.

"What is it?" I asked, resisting slightly. "What's happening?"

He didn't answer. He just pulled harder, his musical language

taking on a slightly sharper tone. All around us, the people were flowing inside, their graceful movements now seeming like a frantic retreat. The beautiful, peaceful world was being abandoned.

The sun dipped below the horizon. The last light of day vanished.

And from the forests that bordered the settlement, I heard it.

A low, chittering sound. Then another. And another. A clicking, scraping noise that was utterly at odds with the paradise of the day.

It was the sound of something emerging from the dark.

The dread in my spine turned to ice. The hollow people weren’t peaceful because they had conquered the world.

They were peaceful because they were hiding from it.

Chapter 7: The Terrors Below

Aven's grip on my arm tightened, his placid urgency now becoming something closer to fear. He pulled me toward the glowing entrance of the nearest building, his melodic speech a rapid, anxious stream. The other people flowed around us, their silent, graceful retreat taking on a panicked quality. The last of them vanished inside just as the first true shadows of night stretched across the meadow.

The chittering from the forest edge grew louder. It was a dry, scraping sound, like stones being dragged over bone. It set my teeth on edge. This was no animal call I had ever heard. It was a sound of pure hunger.

Aven practically shoved me through the doorway into the building. The interior was warm and lit by the same soft, pulsing crystals I had seen earlier. The pearlescent walls seemed to hum with a faint energy. Dozens of the hollow people were inside, huddled together, their faces—usually so blank—now etched with a uniform, shallow dread. They were like children afraid of a thunderstorm, but with no understanding of the lightning.

Aven moved to a console set into the wall—a smooth panel of the same crystalline material. He pressed his palm against it. With a deep, resonant *thrum* , a section of the wall began to slide down, sealing the entrance. It wasn't a door made of wood or metal, but a solid slab of the building itself, flowing like liquid before hardening into place, leaving us in a windowless, sealed chamber.

The silence inside was thick and heavy, broken only by the terrified breathing of the people around me. We were entombed.

And then the sounds began from outside.

Scratching. A slow, deliberate scraping against the outer walls. It was a patient, probing sound. Then a thud, as if something heavy had been thrown against the sealed entrance. The people flinched as one, a silent, synchronized shudder of fear.

I had to see. I had to know what was out there. I pushed my way through the huddled figures toward a section of the wall that felt thinner, a place where the internal light seemed to glow a little brighter. I pressed my eye to it, peering through the semi-translucent material.

The moon was rising, full and bright, casting a silvery light over the landscape. For a moment, I saw nothing but the beautiful, peaceful meadow. Then a shadow detached itself from the tree line.

My breath caught in my throat.

It was a nightmare. It moved on all fours, but its limbs were long and jointed all wrong, like a spider's. Its skin was a pale, waxy grey, stretched taut over a skeletal frame. I couldn't make out a face, just a dark patch where one should be, but I could see its hands—long, bony claws that clicked against the stone pathway as it moved.

It raised its head, and that dark patch seemed to sniff the air. It let out a low, wet gurgle that made my stomach turn. Another one emerged from the trees, and then another. They moved with a horrible, skittering grace, circling the sealed buildings, testing their defenses with those terrible claws.

These were the inheritors of the earth. These were the things that had grown in the dark places while humanity above became soft and beautiful and blind.

One of the creatures stopped right outside my viewing point. It was close enough that I could see the details of its wretched form—the patches of coarse hair, the way its ribs moved under its skin with each breath. It lowered its head and began to scrape at the base of the wall with a single, hooked claw. The sound was like nails on a slate, amplified in the silence.

A woman near me let out a soft, muffled whimper. The creature outside went perfectly still. Its head swiveled toward the sound. Though it had no visible eyes, I felt its attention focus directly on us, on *her* . It knew we were here. It was just a matter of time.

This was the rhythm of this world. The beautiful, hollow people by day, living their simple, vacant lives. And these… these Morlocks… emerging from their subterranean world at night to prey upon them. A perfect, horrifying symbiosis. The Eloi—as I found myself thinking of them in the cold, clinical part of my mind—were not the masters of this world. They were its cattle.

The scratching at the wall grew more insistent. More frantic. Other creatures joined the first, their claws clicking and scraping in a horrifying chorus. The pearlescent material held, but for how long?

I backed away from the wall, my heart hammering. The Eloi around me were paralyzed with a fear so deep it was almost religious. They had no plan to fight. No will to resist. This was simply the way of things. The night belonged to the Terrors.

I looked at their smooth, fear-filled faces, at their simple robes. They had nothing. No weapons. No tools. Not even the spark of defiance.

I had my machine. I had my wits. And I had a burning, primal need to not be eaten alive in this beautiful, terrible future.

The scratching turned into a pounding. A crack appeared in the wall near the sealed entrance, a hairline fracture that gleamed in the crystal light.

We were running out of time.

Chapter 8: The Theft of Time

The hairline crack in the wall spiderwebbed with a sound like snapping icicles. A sliver of the terrifying night outside poured through—a cold draft carrying the musky, foul scent of the creatures. The Eloi around me let out a collective, breathy gasp of terror, pressing themselves against the far wall as if they could melt into it.

They were waiting for the end. It was all they knew how to do.

I was not one of them. I would not wait.

My mind, frozen by a moment of pure horror, kicked into a frantic, desperate gear. The machine. The Chronos Key was

my only chance. It was back in the ruins of my workshop, a mile or more across the darkened valley. A mile filled with those things.

It was impossible. It was the only option.

I turned to Aven, who was staring at the cracking wall with the blank acceptance of a lamb in an abattoir. I grabbed his shoulders, shaking him slightly. His large, light eyes focused on me with a dim curiosity, as if my panic was a fascinating, foreign phenomenon.

“My machine!” I said, my voice a harsh whisper. I pointed in the general direction of the ruins, then mimed operating the controls. “I need to get to it! It can take me away from here! Do you understand? *Away* !”

He just blinked. The concept of escape was as alien to him as the concept of resistance.

A heavy *thud* shook the entire structure. The crack widened. A long, grey finger tipped with a black claw wormed its way through the opening, probing blindly.

Screams, thin and reedy, finally broke from the Eloi. Their

placid terror dissolved into a mindless, scrambling panic. They were like startled birds, fluttering against the walls with no idea where to go.

The sight of that blind, groping claw broke something in Aven. Or maybe it just triggered a deeper, older instinct. Survival. He looked from the claw to my desperate face, and something like understanding flickered in his eyes. He nodded once, a sharp, jerky motion.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the main entrance, toward the back of the round chamber. He pressed his hand against another section of the wall, one that looked no different from any other. A panel slid open, not with a loud hum, but with a silent, seamless motion, revealing a dark, narrow passageway. An escape route. Or more likely, a maintenance conduit.

He pushed me inside. “Go,” he said, the single word clear and strained in his own language. It was the first word of theirs I understood.

I didn’t hesitate. I plunged into the darkness. The passage was tight and smelled of damp earth. I could hear the final, splintering crash of the main entrance giving way behind me,

followed by the shrieks of the Eloi and the wet, hungry snarls of the Morlocks. The sounds were cut off as the panel slid shut behind me, sealing me in utter blackness.

I was alone in the dark.

I had to move. I felt my way along the smooth, cool wall of the passage, stumbling forward. It sloped downward, then leveled out. I had no idea where I was going, only that I was putting distance between myself and the feeding frenzy behind me.

After what felt like an eternity, I saw a faint light ahead. I hurried toward it, emerging from the passage into the cool night air. I was on the other side of the settlement, near the tree line. The screams from the building were distant now, but they still curdled my blood.

The moon was high, illuminating the world in a ghostly silver light. I could see dark, skittering shapes moving around the other buildings. I was outside their immediate notice, for now.

I had to get to my workshop. I oriented myself by the moon and the memory of the valley's shape, and I began to run.

I ran like I have never run in my life. I crashed through the tall, wet grass, my heart pounding in my ears, every shadow a potential horror. The beautiful, peaceful world was now a hunting ground. I heard clicks and gurgles in the darkness around me, but I didn't stop. I didn't look back.

I fell, tripping over a hidden root, and landed hard, the wind knocked out of me. I lay there for a second, gasping, sure that I was finished. But the night remained still. I scrambled to my feet and kept going.

Finally, I saw it. The crumbling outline of my old home, the skeleton of my workshop open to the stars. And there, in the center of the ruins, was the Key. The moonlight glinted off its brass fittings. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

I stumbled into the ruins, falling against the machine, my hands gripping the familiar rails. I was safe. I could leave this nightmare.

I climbed aboard, my fingers fumbling for the main lever. I would go back. Back to my own time, to my dusty, noisy, wonderful London. I would tell Alan and Robert and Clara everything. They would believe me now. They would have to.

I threw the lever.

Nothing happened.

The machine sat there, silent and dead.

A cold worse than any night chill seized my heart. I jiggled the lever. I checked the connections my fingers could find in the dark. Nothing. No hum. No vibration. No blurring of the world.

The power was gone. The crystals were dark.

The Morlocks. They hadn't just been hunting the Eloi. They had been in these ruins. They had found the machine. And they had done something to it. They had stolen my only way home.

I was trapped.

A low, chittering laugh echoed from the edge of the ruins. A pale, hunched shape detached itself from the shadows, then another, and another. They had been waiting. They had known I would come back here.

They had herded me to my cage.

I was not a visitor anymore. I was prey.

Chapter 9: A Desperate Flight

The chittering laughter seemed to come from all around me, a dry, rattling sound that scraped against my nerves. Pale shapes emerged from the darkness between the crumbling walls of my old workshop, their wrong-limbed bodies moving with a terrible, confident slowness. They knew I was cornered. They knew the machine was dead.

My mind, screaming with panic, latched onto a single, desperate thought: *Light* .

The Morlocks had lived in the deep dark for so long, their eyes had atrophied or changed. The moon was bright, but it was nothing to them. But a sudden, violent light… that might be a language they still understood.

My hands, trembling violently, patted down my own body, searching for anything, any tool. My fingers brushed against

the hard shape of the box of matches I'd shoved into my pocket days ago—a habit from lighting my workshop lamp. A pathetic weapon against these nightmares.

But it was all I had.

The closest Morlock lunged, a blur of grey skin and clicking claws. I didn't think. I fumbled a match out of the box, struck it against the rough side, and thrust the tiny, sputtering flame toward its advancing face.

The effect was instantaneous and electric.

The creature let out a shrill, piercing shriek—a sound of pure, agonizing pain—and recoiled violently, scrambling backward and crashing into a pile of rubble. It clutched at its face where the dark patch was, writhing as if the tiny flame had burned it to the bone.

The other Morlocks froze. Their chittering stopped. The sudden silence was more terrifying than their noise. Every one of those faceless heads turned toward the small, dancing fire in my hand.

They were afraid of it.

The match burned down, searing my fingertips. I gasped and dropped it, plunging us back into near-darkness.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then, with a collective snarl of rage and fear, they surged forward again.

I was ready. I had another match already in my hand. I lit it and, this time, I didn't just hold it out. I lunged forward, swiping the flame in a wide arc like a sword.

They fell back again, hissing and spitting, their claws held up to shield themselves. I was a terrifying anomaly to them—a creature that wielded a piece of the sun.

I backed away, step by careful step, toward the open side of the ruins that led to the wider valley. I held the match aloft, my own personal, pathetic star. They followed, but at a distance, a circle of hateful pale shadows just outside my ring of light.

The match died. Darkness rushed back in.

I lit another. And another. My supply was limited. Each match was a few more seconds of life. Each dying flame brought the

circle of horrors closer.

I was out of the ruins now, backing across the open meadow. The tall grass whipped against my legs. I had no plan, no destination. My only goal was to not be where I was when the last match burned out.

One of the bolder Morlocks darted in from my left. I swung the match toward it, and it flinched away, but the movement made me stumble. My foot caught on a rock, and I went down hard. The match flew from my hand and was extinguished in the damp grass.

The darkness was absolute.

I could hear them now, closing in, their guttural breathing, the click of their claws on stone. I scrambled backward on my hands and knees, frantically trying to get another match out of the box. My fingers were numb with fear.

Something grabbed my ankle. A clawed hand, strong and cold as iron, closed around it and began to drag me. I kicked out wildly, my boot connecting with something solid. There was a satisfying grunt of pain, and the grip loosened for a second.

It was enough. I was on my feet, running blind. I didn't care about direction. I just ran.

Ahead of me, I saw a different kind of shadow—a deeper black against the grey of the night. A stand of those strange, silver-barked trees. It was something. It was cover.

I plunged into the small forest, branches whipping at my face and arms. The pursuit behind me seemed to hesitate. The Morlocks' clicking calls took on a new tone—not of hunger, but of frustration, and perhaps… caution.

Why wouldn't they follow me into the trees?

I didn't stop to wonder. I ran until my lungs burned and my legs gave way. I collapsed at the base of a large tree, pressing myself against its trunk, trying to make myself small.

I listened. The forest was silent. No clicking. No scraping. No sound of pursuit.

I was alone.

I huddled there, shivering in the cool night air, waiting for the dawn. The matches had saved me, but they were gone. The

machine was dead. I was stranded in this beautiful, terrible future, a prisoner of the light, forever fleeing the dark.

The first grey light of dawn began to filter through the leaves. As the world slowly gained color and form, I saw what the night had hidden.

Carved into the bark of the tree I was leaning against were deep, deliberate grooves. Not the random marks of an animal. They were symbols. Crude, but unmistakable. Arrows. Circles. A pattern.

Someone, or something, had been here. Someone who knew how to mark a trail.

And it wasn't the Morlocks.

A tiny, desperate spark of hope flickered in the vast darkness of my despair.

I was not the first.

Chapter 10: The End of All Things

The carved symbols were a lifeline thrown into the ocean of my despair. They were crude, made with a sharp stone by an unpracticed hand, but they were *deliberate* . They told a story the Eloi could not, and the Morlocks would not. A story of awareness. Of a mind that saw the world and sought to mark it.

I followed them.

The symbols led me deeper into the silverwood forest, away from the Eloi settlement and the ruins of my workshop. The trees grew thicker, their canopies weaving together to form a cathedral-like ceiling. The air was cool and still. With every step, the normal, terrifying sounds of the night—the chittering and clicking—faded, replaced by an older, deeper silence. It was the silence of a world winding down.

The symbols changed as I went. The arrows became more frequent, more urgent. They were joined by other shapes: a

single, slashed line repeated over and over, like a tally. A crude drawing of a sun, crossed out. A stick figure with its arms raised, not in triumph, but in what looked like agony.

The forest began to thin. The silver-barked trees gave way to a rocky, desolate landscape. The air grew colder. The vibrant, humid warmth of the Eloi's valley was gone. Here, a bitter wind whipped across bare stone, carrying a fine, grey dust that coated my tongue and stung my eyes.

The symbols led me to the mouth of a cave, a dark maw set into the side of a crumbling cliff face. Above the entrance, someone had taken great pains to carve a final, sprawling message. It wasn't a symbol I knew. It was a word, etched in shaky, desperate letters from a language that had died millennia ago:

HELP

My heart hammered against my ribs. This was it. The end of the trail. I took one of the few remaining matches from my dwindling box, lit it, and holding it before me like a tiny shield, I stepped inside.

The cave was not deep. The light from my match flickered

over the walls, revealing not stone, but something else. Something smooth and manufactured. I was in a room, a bunker, sealed away from the world outside.

And in the center of the room, slumped in a chair before a rusted console, was a skeleton.

I stumbled back, a cry catching in my throat. The match flickered and died. In the darkness, the image of those empty eye sockets and grinning teeth was burned onto my vision. I fumbled for another match, my hands shaking so badly I could barely light it.

The flame flared back to life. I forced myself to look.

He—I felt it was a he—was dressed in the tattered remains of a practical jumpsuit, far more utilitarian than the flowing robes of the Eloi. Beside the chair lay a rusted metal bar, its end sharpened to a point. A weapon. On the console in front of him was a journal, its pages brittle and yellowed.

This was the cartographer. The one who had left the marks. The last thinking man in the world.

I approached slowly, a reverence settling over my terror. I

carefully picked up the journal. The writing inside was faded, a frantic scrawl in a language I could somehow still understand, as if the sheer will of the writer transcended time itself.

The sun is dying. The air grows thin. The others… they forget. They change. They become simple, happy in their ignorance. They let the world fade and do not care.

They come from below. The crawlers. The feeders. They were us, once. The ones who went deep to escape the dying of the light. They changed, too. But into… this.

I remember. I alone remember cities and stars and music. It is a curse. I have tried to make them remember. They only smile.

I have seen the end. The calculations are clear. The world is cold. The sun is a pale, weak thing. The feeders will inherit this frozen rock. There is no hope left.

I am the last. When I am gone, there will be no one left to know that we were ever more than this.

God forgive us.

The final entry was a single sentence, the letters shaky and weak:

I hear them digging at the door.

I lowered the journal, the weight of its words crushing me. This wasn't just the future. This was the *end* of the future. The final, frozen stop. Humanity had not evolved into the beautiful Eloi; it had devolved, split into two branches of failure: one that chose blissful ignorance in the sun, and one that became monstrous in the dark. And both were destined to fade into nothingness under a dying star.

The hope I'd felt from the symbols curdled into a profound, universe-sized grief. I had not come to witness the future. I had come to witness our funeral.

A noise echoed from the cave entrance—a familiar, dreaded clicking.

They had found me.

I looked from the skeleton of the last thinker to his sharpened metal staff. I looked at the journal in my hand, the final testament of my entire species.

I would not end like him. Waiting in the dark for the end to come digging.

I grabbed the metal staff. It felt solid, real, in my hand. A weapon from the past, for a war at the end of time.

The clicking grew louder. Shadows moved in the mouth of the cave.

I had no matches left.

But I had a purpose. I would not die cowering. I would die like a man from the Age of Fire, fighting the dying of the light with a sharpened piece of steel.

I tightened my grip on the staff and faced the entrance.

“Come on, then!” I screamed, my voice raw and broken in the ancient, silent cave. My voice was a sound that hadn't been heard in eight hundred thousand years. A sound of defiance.

The first Morlock skittered into the room.

And I charged.

Chapter 11: The Long Journey Home

The Morlock was faster than I was. It ducked under my wild, two-handed swing with the metal staff, its movements a blur of unnatural angles. It lunged, claws extended for my throat. I didn't have the skill to block it. I had only momentum and desperation.

I threw my weight sideways, crashing into the rusted console. The impact jarred the staff from my hand, sending it clattering across the stone floor. The creature was on me in an instant, its weight pinning me down, its musky, foul smell filling my nostrils. I got my hands up, gripping its bony wrists, straining to keep those black claws from my face. Its strength was immense.

This was it. This was how it ended. In a dark hole at the end of time.

My hand, scrabbling blindly across the floor, brushed against something cold and cylindrical. The sharpened end of the

staff. But my fingers closed around something else first. Something smaller, nestled against the leg of the console. A box.

The dead man's matches.

With a final, guttural roar, I shoved the creature back just enough to wrench one arm free. I tore the box open, dumped its contents into my palm—a few precious, precious sticks—and smashed the whole lot against the stone floor.

A blinding flash of light and a shower of sparks erupted in the confined space.

The Morlock on top of me shrieked, a sound of pure, animal agony. It recoiled, clawing at its light-sensitive face, scrambling backward off of me. I didn't wait. I was on my feet, grabbing the staff. The other Morlocks in the cave entrance were hissing and shielding their faces, confused and blinded by the sudden, violent flare.

I didn't charge them. I ran *past* them.

I burst out of the cave into the dim, grey daylight and I didn't look back. I ran across the rocky plain, the dead man's journal

clutched in my other hand, the metal staff feeling like an anchor. I heard their enraged clicks and snarls behind me, but they did not give immediate chase. The flash had bought me time.

My mind was a single, repeating thought: *The machine. The machine. The machine.*

It was dead. The Morlocks had done something to it. But it was all I had. It was the only piece of my world left in this corpse of a future.

I ran for what felt like hours, driven by a terror that was now edged with a desperate, crazy hope. The symbols. The journal. The matches. The previous traveler had left tools. What if he had known about the machine? What if he had tried to fix it?

I reached the ruins of my workshop as the sun—pale and weak as the journal had described—began to dip toward the horizon. The Chronos Key sat where I had left it, silent and dark.

I fell to my knees before it, my breath sobbing in my chest. I ran my hands over its familiar lines. I opened the panels I had built, looking for damage, for sabotage.

There was none. The wiring was intact. The crystals were seated properly. But they were dark, lifeless. It was like looking at a steam engine with no fire, a clock with no mainspring.

The journal felt heavy in my pocket. I pulled it out, my hands trembling. I flipped through the brittle pages, not reading the words, looking for… anything. A diagram. A note.

And there, on the last page, scrawled in a margin, was a sketch. It was crude, but unmistakable. It was a drawing of the Chronos Key. And next to it, an arrow pointed to the main housing with two words written beside it:

“Temporal Decay.”

My breath caught. He *had* seen it. He had understood what it was. And he had diagnosed the problem.

Time itself was the power source. But in this era, at the very end of things, time was… thin. Sapped. Stretched to its breaking point. There wasn’t enough potential energy left in the universe to fuel the machine. The Morlocks hadn’t broken it. The heat death of the universe had.

The hope that had carried me here shattered.

And then I looked at the sharpened metal staff lying on the ground beside me. And I looked at the brass and copper of the machine.

“The ones who went deep to escape the dying of the light…”

The Morlocks lived deep underground. Where time’s decay might be slower. Where the ancient energies of the planet might still hold a faint echo of power.

It was a insane gamble. A ghost of a chance.

But it was the only one I had.

I didn’t have tools. I had a weapon. I raised the metal staff and, with a scream of effort, I brought it down on the machine I had spent my life building. I smashed at the housing, tearing open the panel that protected the main crystalline power core. I ignored the pain in my hands, the horror of what I was doing.

I ripped the core free. It was a complex lattice of quartz and copper wiring, now dark and dead.

The sun was almost gone. The clicks and chitters were starting up in the forest edge.

I had no plan. No idea where to go. I just started running away from the ruins, toward the general area where I knew the Morlock tunnels had to be. I was looking for a hole, a fissure, any entrance to their underworld.

I found it: a yawning crack in the earth, exhaling a breath of damp, foul air. It was the mouth of hell.

I didn't hesitate. I clutched the dead power core to my chest, held the staff ready, and plunged into the darkness.

I descended into a nightmare world of tunnels and phosphorescent fungus. I moved by feel and by the faint, sickly green light. I could hear them moving everywhere around me, but I was deep in their territory now, and my scent was just one among many.

I don't know how long I wandered. Minutes? Hours? I found a chamber where the walls hummed with a faint, geothermal warmth. An energy that felt old and deep.

This was it.

I shoved the power core into a narrow fissure in the warm rock, wedging it deep into the earth's fading heart.

And I waited.

Nothing happened.

I slumped against the tunnel wall, defeated. It was over.

Then, a faint, blue flicker. Deep within the quartz lattice, a spark of light traveled along a copper wire. Then another. A soft, familiar hum began to emanate from the core. It was weak. It was intermittent. But it was power.

The Morlocks were coming. Drawn by the sound, by the light.

I snatched the core from the fissure. It was warm in my hands, humming with a fragile, stolen energy. I turned and ran back the way I came, scrambling up through the tunnels, toward the fading twilight.

I burst out of the crack in the earth and sprinted for the ruins. The Morlocks were pouring out of the ground behind me, a

tide of pale fury.

I didn't have time to reinstall it properly. I slammed the core into its housing in the machine, wires hanging loose, crystals misaligned. I climbed aboard.

I looked back. They were almost on me.

I threw the lever.

The world screamed. The blur was violent, sickening, unstable. The machine shuddered and bucked like a wild thing. The power was erratic, fluctuating wildly. I wasn't traveling through time; I was being vomited through it.

I saw glimpses of worlds flashing past. A frozen wasteland. A boiling ocean. A sky filled with strange, silent ships. The journey was a chaos of broken images and tearing forces.

I clung to the controls, praying the machine would hold together, that the stolen power would be enough.

With a final, catastrophic lurch, it stopped.

The silence was absolute.

I was in my workshop. My *real* workshop. The walls were solid. The smell of oil was strong. The electric light bulb burned steadily overhead.

I was home.

I collapsed onto the floor, sobbing with relief, the cold, solid boards of the nineteenth century beneath my cheek.

I had made it.

Chapter 12: A Story No One Believes

I don’t know how long I lay on the workshop floor. It could

have been minutes or hours. I just breathed in the familiar, greasy air and listened to the profound, beautiful silence of my own time. No chittering. No screams. Just the occasional creak of the house settling and the distant clip-clop of a horse on the street outside.

Slowly, painfully, I pushed myself up. Every muscle ached. My clothes were torn and stained with alien dirt and my own blood. I looked at the Chronos Key. It sat silent and dark, its housing cracked and battered, wires spilling out like guts. It was a wreck. A relic of a journey that had nearly killed me.

I stumbled out of the workshop and into the hall. I needed to see it. I needed to confirm it was real. I went to the front door, my hand shaking as I turned the knob and pulled it open.

A foggy London evening greeted me. A hansom cab rolled past, the driver tipping his hat to me. A newspaper boy on the corner shouted about headlines I understood. The air smelled of coal smoke and rain—the best smells I had ever experienced. I leaned against the doorframe, weak with a relief so profound it felt like a new kind of pain.

I was home.

The next few days were a blur. I slept for almost twenty-four hours straight. I ate. I bathed. I tried to scrub the memory of the Morlocks' stench from my skin. But some things wouldn't wash away. The gauntness in my face in the mirror. The new, permanent fear in my own eyes. The lingering ache in my bones from a journey that had stretched my very soul.

I had to tell someone. The weight of what I had seen was crushing me. I needed to share the burden, to make it real by having someone else know it.

I invited them back. Alan, Clara, Robert. The same audience from my first, disastrous demonstration.

They arrived looking concerned. They had heard nothing from me in days. When I opened the door, Alan's medical eye immediately took in my haggard appearance, the fresh cuts on my hands.

"Elias, good God, man," he said, stepping inside. "What happened to you? You look like you've been dragged through a hedge backward."

"Through more than a hedge," I said, my voice raspy.

We went through the same motions. Sherry in the parlor. But the atmosphere was different. They weren't skeptical friends now; they were worried ones, gathered around a convalescent.

"So," Robert began, trying to sound light. "Did your time machine finally take you on a holiday?"

I looked at their kind, puzzled faces. How could I possibly explain?

"It worked," I said, the words simple and heavy. "I went forward. A long, long way forward."

I told them everything. I didn't try to sound like a dispassionate scientist. I told them about the beautiful, hollow Eloi, living their vacant lives in a blooming paradise. I described the terror of the night, the skittering, pale horrors that fed on them. I told them about the cave, the skeleton of the last thinker, his journal, the desperate, dying words of our entire species. I told them of the dying sun and the frozen, hopeless end of all things.

My voice broke as I described the final, desperate gamble in the tunnels, the stolen power from the world's cooling heart.

I finished, my hands trembling around my glass of sherry. The fire crackled in the hearth.

No one spoke.

Clara was the first. She leaned forward, her expression one of deep professional concern. “Elias… this is a… very detailed dream. The stress of your work…”

“It wasn’t a dream!” I insisted, the memory of those claws making my voice sharp. “It was real! I have proof!”

I pulled the journal from my pocket and laid it on the table between us. It was a sad, pathetic thing now. The brittle pages had crumbled further during my frantic journey home. It was little more than a bundle of dust and fragile fragments, the writing almost entirely obliterated. A piece of the cover, with the faintest ghost of the word “HELP,” was all that remained even slightly intact.

Robert picked up a fragment. It disintegrated into dust at his touch. He looked at me with profound pity. “Elias… this is a piece of trash. It’s nothing.”

“It was a journal!” I cried, my desperation mounting. “It told

the whole story! The man who wrote it, he was like me! He knew!"

Alan stood up and came over to me, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Elias, listen to yourself. You're talking about mole-people and fairy folk. You've been working too hard. You've had a nervous collapse. It happens to the best of minds. You need rest. Proper rest."

They didn't believe me. They saw a broken man telling a broken story. The proof was dust. The machine was a silent, broken hulk in my workshop. My word was all I had, and my word was the ranting of a madman.

I saw it in their eyes. Not doubt. Not skepticism. Something worse: a gentle, absolute certainty that I had lost my mind.

I had journeyed to the end of time and back. I had witnessed the absolute truth of our destiny.

And I had returned to find that the truth was unbearable. Unbelievable.

I stopped talking. I just nodded slowly, the fight going out of me. "Yes," I whispered. "You're probably right. I'm very

tired.”

They stayed for a while longer, talking in hushed, concerned tones, making plans for me to see a specialist, to take a long vacation by the sea. I nodded along, a hollow man agreeing with everything they said.

Finally, they left. Alan was the last to go. “We’re your friends, Elias,” he said softly at the door. “We just want to help you.”

“I know,” I said. And I closed the door.

I stood alone in my silent hall, the dust of the future still on my fingertips. I was more alone now than I had been at the end of time. Then, I had a purpose. Now, I had a secret too terrible to be heard, and a truth that would die with me.

I was the only man in the world who knew how it all ended.

And no one would ever believe me.

Epilogue: The Only Proof

They mean well. Alan visits every week, his kind face a mask of careful optimism. He talks about the weather, new developments at the hospital, anything but the workshop. He thinks the door to that room is best kept locked, the key thrown away. He believes time, the gentle, linear kind, will heal me.

Clara wrote a small, sympathetic piece in her paper about the perils of scientific obsession. She called it a "cautionary tale," painting me as a brilliant mind pushed to the brink by an impossible dream. She got a great deal of mail about it. People love a tragic genius.

Robert never came back. I think my madness made him uncomfortable. It was too visceral, too real a failure of reason for a man who lives in the world of ideas.

My house is quiet. I sit in my parlor most days, watching the dust motes dance in the sunlight. I try to read, but the words seem small and meaningless. How can I care about politics or poetry when I have seen the sun grow cold?

The Chronos Key is still in the workshop. I went in there once, about a month after I returned. The sight of it—battered, silent, a monument to my folly and my triumph—made me physically ill. I haven't been back since. The door stays closed.

I thought about destroying it. Smashing it to pieces with a sledgehammer and burning the remains. Ensuring no one could ever follow my path, could ever witness what I witnessed.

But I can't bring myself to do it.

It is the only proof I have that it wasn't a dream. That it was real. As long as it exists, even as a broken pile of brass and wire, my sanity has an anchor. However fragile.

So I let it gather dust. A tombstone for a truth I can never share.

Sometimes, at night, I have nightmares. I hear the chittering in the wind outside my window. I see the hollow, placid faces of the Eloi superimposed on the people I pass in the street. I wake up in a cold sweat, sure that I can smell the damp, mossy scent of the far future in my room.

And sometimes, in the very worst dreams, I'm not myself. I am the one in the cave. I am the last thinker, my hands carving desperate symbols into stone as the world forgets, and the darkness digs patiently at my door.

I have brought something back with me, you see. It wasn't a trophy or an artifact. It was the silence. The immense, crushing silence of a universe winding down. It lives inside me now, a cold weight in my chest that all the noise of London can never drown out.

I tend to my small garden now. I plant flowers. It is a pointless exercise, I know. In a million years, nothing of me or my roses will remain. But I find a strange, sad comfort in the simple act of nurturing something. Of encouraging life, however briefly.

It is my own small, silent rebellion against the end I have seen.

The world turns. People live their lives, blissfully unaware of the abyss that waits at the end of our collective road. They worry about love and money and tomorrow. Their ignorance is their paradise.

And I, the only man to have seen the future, must live among them. I must smile and nod and talk about the rain. I must pretend I don't know the terrible, beautiful, and utterly futile secret of it all.

This is my curse. This is the price of the Key.

I have unlocked time, and in return, it has locked me away from my own kind forever.

The only thing left to do is to tend my garden, and wait.

Acknowledgements

No book, especially one of this nature, is written in a vacuum. While the journey was a solitary one, the support along the way was not.

My deepest gratitude to Dr. Alan Ward, whose friendship and unwavering concern provided a much-needed anchor to the present.

To the memory of my grandfather, the watchmaker, who first taught me that every machine, no matter how complex, has a heart that can be understood.

And to the countless thinkers, dreamers, and scientists whose work laid the groundwork for the theories explored here. We stand on the shoulders of giants, even if we occasionally

stumble into the abyss.

About the Author

Dennis Longtin is a writer and lifelong enthusiast of speculative fiction and the fundamental mysteries of the universe. He lives a quiet life, preferring the company of books and the steady, reliable tick of a clock. *The Chronos Key* is his first novel.

A Note from the Publisher

The manuscript for *The Chronos Key* was delivered to our offices under unusual circumstances. While presented as a work of fiction, the conviction in the telling and the intricate, almost obsessive detail gave us pause. We leave it to you, the reader, to decide where the line between invention and truth may truly lie. Some doors, once opened, are best left unclosed.